

Silver surge results in a flood of queries about a 'hot' property

By Roger Boye

THE GYRATING price of silver has prompted scores of Tribune readers to mail in questions about old coins and currency. Here are answers to some of the queries.

Q — We've got a few \$5 bills from the 1920s that say, "Redeemable in gold at the United States Treasury," and several \$1 silver certificates that promise, "One dollar in silver payable to the bearer on demand." Where can we go to get our gold and silver? — W.E., Hickory Hills

A — Old U.S. paper money can no longer be redeemed in gold and silver, regardless of what is printed on the bills. The government voided the "exchange statements" years ago.

Q — If it is wrong to counterfeit money, how can silver coins be melted down for their silver content? Isn't it illegal to deface coins? — H.L., Chicago

A — Yes, it is unlawful to deface coins, as well as to "alter, mutilate, impair, diminish, falsify, scale, or lighten" them. But there's nothing wrong with melting silver coins, at least for now.

Under the law, the Treasury secretary may bar the melting or exportation of any U.S. coin denomination "if such action is necessary to protect the coinage of the United States."

Q — A few weeks ago you listed the U.S. coins containing silver. We've got Canadian coins going back to the 1920s. Which ones are made with silver? — R.H., Chicago

A — Canadian dimes, quarters, half-dollars, and dollar coins minted in 1967 or earlier contain silver, as do some coins dated 1968 (Canada quit producing silver coins in August, 1968). Also, until 1920 Canada used silver in its 5-cent coins.

Q — I'm told that many silver coins in uncirculated condition are worth more than their "silver value" as collector items. Is condition determined by the amount of shine on a coin? — A.C., Iowa City, Iowa

A — No, it is based on the amount of wear. Coins in uncirculated condition show no trace of wear, even on the highest parts of the design. Usually, such coins have much mint luster, but the experienced collector looks at the design, not the shine.